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The Shame of Draupadi: Reading Public Humiliation and Gendered Gaze in the Sabha Parva

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Abstract: The Sabha Parva of the Mahabharata holds one of the most disturbing episodes in Indian epic tradition—Draupadi’s public humiliation in the Kuru court. This paper explores how the female body becomes a site of male gaze, political control, and gendered violence within a patriarchal system. By applying feminist theory and visual studies, the essay examines the disrobing episode as more than a myth—it is a gendered spectacle of power, shame, and resistance. The paper also draws on critical voices like Simone de Beauvoir, Laura Mulvey, and Alf Hiltebeitel to interrogate the moral silence of the court and the cultural implications of Draupadi’s shame.

Keywords: Draupadi, Sabha Parva, Mahabharata, gendered gaze, humiliation, patriarchy, feminist theory

Introduction: Draupadi’s disrobing in the Sabha Parva is not merely a moment of mythological cruelty; it is a carefully staged political drama where the female body is turned into a battlefield. The court becomes a site of spectacle, and Draupadi—a queen, a wife, and a woman—is stripped of her agency, her dignity, and nearly her clothing. This article explores the complex meanings of that moment through the lenses of gendered gaze, public shaming, and textual resistance. As Simone de Beauvoir asserts, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”—and in this scene, Draupadi is violently made into ‘woman’ by patriarchal forces.

Methodology: This paper adopts qualitative and analytical methodology. It closely reads the Sabha Parva episode of Draupadi’s disrobing from the Mahabharata in English translation, alongside feminist literary criticism, cultural theory, and gender studies. The approach is intertextual, drawing upon critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on subaltern women, Judith Butler on performativity, and Martha Nussbaum on shame and dignity. Comparative references are also made to other Indian epics and folk retellings to highlight cultural variations in Draupadi’s humiliation.

Objectives

1. To analyze the disrobing of Draupadi as a literary and cultural moment of collective humiliation.
2. To study how public gaze and patriarchal silence reinforce women's shame in epic and society.
3. To explore feminist reinterpretations of Draupadi's suffering in modern criticism and literature.
4. To argue that Draupadi's resistance provides an early form of feminist agency in Indian epics.

Historical and Cultural Background of Draupadi

Draupadi's birth itself is unusual. Born of fire, she is not just a mortal woman but a mythic symbol of justice, dharma, and feminine strength. She is married to five husbands—the Pandavas—yet in the Sabha Parva, she is abandoned by all. Her identity is politically powerful yet socially vulnerable. According to Alf Hiltebeitel, Draupadi is “the most complex female character in world epics... both divine and human, both victim and agent.” In traditional patriarchal societies, women's bodies are used to settle disputes, assert masculine power, and define community honor. Draupadi becomes exactly that: a tool through which Duryodhana asserts his revenge and male dominance.

The Sabha Scene and the Act of Gaze

The Sabha Parva presents the famous game of dice episode, where Yudhishtira gambles away his kingdom, his brothers, himself—and finally, Draupadi. She is dragged into the court by Duhshasana, menstruating and in a single cloth, which was considered ritually impure and shameful in the epic world. This act is not just physical—it is deeply visual. Draupadi becomes the object of every male gaze in the room. Laura Mulvey, in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” writes, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.” Draupadi is the passive spectacle, and every man—from Dhritarashtra to Bhishma—is complicit. The gaze in the Sabha is collective and ritualistic. It constructs the moment as both spectacle and shame. As Wendy Doniger notes, “In Draupadi's humiliation, the audience becomes both voyeur and judge.”

The Female Body as Battlefield

The body of Draupadi in this scene is not just biological—it is political. Gayatri Spivak famously asked, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Draupadi does speak—but the space does not allow her voice any power. Her body, stripped of protection, becomes the very stage where masculine rivalry plays out. When Duhshasana tries to remove her clothing, Krishna protects her by making the cloth endless. However, the violation is already symbolically complete. The male court has already torn her dignity. Even divine intervention cannot erase the collective failure of that space. This act echoes many stories in Indian literature where female shame is public, ritualized, and communal—like Sita's trial by fire or Shakuntala's rejection by Dushyanta. Draupadi's humiliation is part of a longer tradition of associating female honor with public spectacle.

Draupadi's Voice as Resistance

Unlike other women in epics who silently suffer, Draupadi questions the very rules of dharma. Her famous interrogation of the court— “Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?”, exposes the logical and ethical flaw in Yudhishtira's act. This is active resistance, a refusal to be silenced. Draupadi refuses to collapse into victimhood. She uses her intellect, rhetoric, and sense of justice to turn the shame into political speech. Uma Chakravarti says that Draupadi “breaks the boundaries set for female behavior and questions dharma from the margins.”

The Gendered Gaze and Patriarchal Injustice: The Sabha becomes a microcosm of patriarchal injustice. Women are not only absent from decision-making but are also used as symbols of male honor. Draupadi is reduced to property, wager, a spectacle. Her presence in the court challenges that reduction. The male gaze here is not erotic—it is disciplinary. Like Foucault's Panopticon, every eye in the court becomes an instrument of control. Draupadi's shame is constructed by the surrounding silence. As Spivak remarks, “silence is not absence of speech but absence of acknowledgment.” Even figures like Bhishma, Vidura, and Dhritarashtra remain frozen in moral paralysis. The institutional patriarchy of the Kuru court outweighs their personal ethics.

Intertextual Readings and Modern Relevance

Modern retellings like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retell the episode from Draupadi's own voice, centering her pain, anger, and agency. In her version, Draupadi says, “It is not the cloth that keeps a woman dignified—it is the gaze that refuses to see her as human.” In feminist readings by Irawati Karve, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and Madhu Kishwar, Draupadi is no longer a passive myth but an emblem of resistance. Her shame is made visible so that the cost of patriarchy is made public. Even today, the spectacle of public rape, moral policing, and trial by media shows that the female body remains a site of social control. Draupadi's shame is ancient, but it remains urgently relevant.

Findings

The paper finds that Draupadi's humiliation is not an isolated event, but a dramatization of gendered power imbalance deeply embedded in patriarchal structures. It shows how the Sabha (court) becomes a stage where public shame transforms into political violence. The analysis further reveals that Draupadi's bold questioning and her refusal to accept silence expose the moral crisis of the epic heroes. Modern feminist readings reclaim Draupadi as a voice of protest rather than a passive victim, making her an enduring symbol of resistance.

Conclusion

Draupadi's disrobing episode in the Mahabharata demonstrates the intersection of gender, shame, and power. While it exposes the vulnerability of women in patriarchal societies, it also highlights the strength of female voice in the face of humiliation. Her refusal to be silenced anticipates later feminist struggles for dignity and justice. Thus, Draupadi becomes not only a tragic figure of shame but also a timeless icon of resilience and agency.

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